



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

NEWSPAPER CONSCIENCE—A STUDY IN HALF-TRUTHS

ALFRED H. LLOYD
University of Michigan

ABSTRACT

The newspaper conscience. Like life generally, the newspaper has been abnormal and hardly suggestive of conscience and control. Yet it may have belied appearances. Its obvious faults, too, may be potential with virtue. Like the late medieval church, as necessary as outwardly offensive, it has at least set offense and opportunity intimately vis-à-vis and so its awakening and reform are assured. Such an attack as Sinclair's is not to be taken whole, but it may not be denied or neglected. *Six counts against the press.* The real case of the people against the press has at least six counts—commercialism, a general salesmanship mentality not confined to the advertising, a merely standpat and falsely motivated conservatism, a boasted but biased, often pruriently selective publicity control by the crowd mind with accompanying "automatism" and occult "communication," and finally a ready but really undemocratic contempt for positive individuality and leadership. While of course only half-truths, these charges are too generally warranted to be overlooked. *Indications of an improvement in the press.* The newspaper will show conscience, as it wakens generally to its faults, and its ideal expression. Conscience is simply intelligence about self and the life in which one finds oneself with an accompanying sense of obligation to realize the recognized desirable possibilities, and the newspaper, today more or less of a prodigal, is bound thus to come to itself. There are already certain signs of its awakening and a vigorous newspaper conscience may be counted on to become general instead of exceptional.

In the pleasant age of once-upon-a-time among certain intellectuals of an interesting people there lived a man who combined with considerable powers of mind a disposition to be a bit cynical. He wrote on large subjects and once, writing on "Nature," meaning the world of things in general that move and grow, that are in all their different ways so many objects to our senses, he added as a secondary title, "The Non-existent," and, if indeed he was genuine, thought to prove his case.

Protagoras' spirit, whatever it was, grim humor, cynicism, or possibly even near conviction, I fear is not dead. Some, I know, to my large title, "The Newspaper Conscience," would insist that once more that secondary title, "The Non-existent," should be added, being so eminently appropriate. Among such skeptics or cynics or humorists I may possibly belong—at least in some of my

moods. Certainly, to be quite candid, the topic which was suggested to me probably would not have come into my imagination spontaneously, for conscience is not exactly the obtrusive fact of present-day journalism. Still, let us not decide the question too hastily. If for no other reason, just to have a subject to write about, I submit that conscience after all, personally or journalistically, is a matter of definition. Existent or non-existent, a newspaper conscience must depend on one's definition. Definition, indeed, has the omnipotence of deity, since anything can be defined out of or into existence. If you are not reassured, wait. I mean, please wait. Above all, don't take anything I would say until I have really finished saying it. Remember, too, even with some intimation of a possible definition, that conscience, if active and significant, must not be confused with mere conventional morality or the habits of mind or heart which, with whatever lapses, tend to maintain such morality.

Unfortunately for the success of my search after a newspaper conscience, or after a revealing or creating definition, the times are far from auspicious. Newspaperdom, like every other department of life, has been greatly unsettled. If the war left anything of character and responsibility to the newspaper or to anything else, the recent campaign has taken that. Said a speaker in so many words here in Ann Arbor only a week or two ago,¹ voicing, I suspect, too accurately the feeling of many the country over: "The idealism first aroused by the war has gone, its disappearance only proving the charge, brought against us by our enemies, of pharisaism. Apparently nothing is now left of our spiritual awakening but the ouija board." This was extravagant, of course, but a general ouija board mentality, too well reflected in our newspapers, in their "stories" or in many of their editorials, will have to be reckoned with before I have finished. For the moment, in evidence of present conditions simply put to yourselves this question: Today, when newspaper circulations are enormous, when the newspaper-reading habit, that pleasantly rustling, often coffee-or-tobacco-redolent, breakfast-table or comfortable-chair, or

¹ This paper was written in the winter of 1920-21 and was read before the University Press Club of Michigan at a conference held in Ann Arbor.

Sunday-morning habit, is almost universal, every stratum of life as well as almost every mood of human nature having its specially provided columns or pages, the photogravures, the comic supplements, the "movies," the cartoons, the always critical and never ending serial, the reporter's "stories," the murders adjoining the Washington news, the *ex parte* editorials, and all the rest; today, when business and leisure, political parties and society are all in their several ways dependent on the press, today, does the press occupy a position of real respect? It is accepted. It is quietly, almost insidiously, influential; but is it trusted? Is it suspected of high purpose, of honesty and independence, of devotion to truth and justice, of anything suggesting moral aggression or adventure? We have to answer, not indeed sweepingly and categorically, since there are exceptions, but on the whole negatively. Certainly it is not a Victorian enterprise. Such respected or at least morally and intellectually respectable papers as there are in the whole country can probably be counted on one hand. Even should one need one's full quota of digits, manual and pedal, the case would still be disturbing. Some of the papers, too, commonly classed as respectable have been or still are under serious charges, being said to be under one or another compromising control and—let me speak cautiously—not being quite clearly not so. Our papers we must have, so to speak, with our coffee; but, much as I hate to suggest it, apparently "there's a reason" why we should at least decaffeinate the coffee if not openly take to postum—and to *The Christian Science Monitor*!

It is truly a curious situation in which we now are. We must have and we do take what on the whole we cannot and do not accept with much if any real satisfaction or any honest confidence. It is a situation that makes one wonder which is greater, our danger or the newspaper's neglected opportunity. I have to recall, not an equivalent, but an at least analogous, situation of some centuries ago. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the church was a great need; never in its whole history so great a need, so much in popular demand, so widely accepted; but also at the same time it was a great scandal, never in its whole history so great a scandal, immoral from its head down. The Machiavellism of the time—

the great Florentine himself lived from 1469 to 1527—was only a sort of temporal or secular echo of the then noisome church. Now our modern press is not in general so bad as to need to be associated very closely with the church of the days of Pope Sixtus IV and the Borgias, Alexander VI, and Machiavelli; but, as then with the church, so now with the press we do find set vis-à-vis great danger, already realized in many offenses and disasters, and great opportunity, not yet realized as it should be. Of the opportunity I must speak in due time. As to the danger and the offense I would certainly not exaggerate these. I am not one to swallow anything whole. Sinclair's *The Brass Check*, for example, which we do not hear much of through the newspapers, I have read and I have to take moderately; the author himself too well exemplifies the newspaper atmosphere, opposing like with like;¹ but, large allowances being made, there still remains a case that cannot be met by mere denial or by, what is always suspicious, conspicuous neglect. Rose Macaulay's *Potterism*, rich with satire on present life generally, as well as on the press, shows the same case, albeit at a different angle. The great Potter, eventually made "Lord Pinkerton," is head of the "Pinkerton Press." Resentment and satire aside, however, the lack of general positive respect—respect touched with enthusiasm—for the press cannot be smoke without some fire. Fortunately, when a needed thing needs reform, reform is certain, however slowly it may sometimes come; when a needed thing, like the church, like the press, shows defects, its very importance saves it; its faults, too, are even likely to prove possible virtues; also there will be actual exceptions, so to speak, to lead the way; but just now, however one-sidedly, our attention is on the press's defects.

¹ See review of *The Brass Check* from *The New Statesman* (London, October 23, 1920), reprinted in *The Living Age* (Boston, November 4, 1920). Says the reviewer, after reciting Sinclair's charges of a black-list for all opponents of Big Business, of an incurable habit of perverting words and actions of speakers and public men and of domination by the great financial and industrial interests: "Certainly it is true that in no other country has the press developed so satanic an ingenuity of perversion, so extraordinary a facility in presenting a man as a fool or an undesirable [sometimes an offensive autocrat?], in making him say or imply what never entered his mind." Two contributory reasons are mentioned: The American view that stenography is a drawback to good reporting, and the assumption that a straight report of a meeting or interview is not news, not a story, in the American sense.

I have no intention of making out the whole case of the public against the newspaper. I shall mention, only for the purpose of the present discussion, a few of the counts, of my half-truths which, however fractional, need to be faced. Thus there is, for the first, the advertising. I might say the morally uncensored, unexpurgated advertising; but not there lies the point I would stress, although there lies a real point. I have in mind the not uncommon virtual control of the advertising or the advertisers over the news and editorial departments. Even our college paper, *The Michigan Daily*, it is rumored, not very long ago had some difficulty with its advertisers because of its interest in the wear-your-old-clothes campaign among the students. Other papers, not much farther off, could possibly confess that sometimes the reporter or the editor did know what the advertiser wanted. I happen to know in the case of a prominent, widely known eastern daily, of definite protests and threats from important business interests against reports and editorials about certain labor agitations. But elaboration of the case on this score is needless. The fact that the papers seek large circulations to tempt the advertisers and that the advertisers naturally expect their interests to be conserved is a commonplace of modern journalism, easily read between the pages of any typical daily paper.

I turn to a second count. Not only do the advertisers check the news or at critical points influence the policy, so prostituting the public press to private or at least to conservative and stand-pat commercial purposes, but also for obvious reasons the peculiar mentality of advertising with its lure and its stimulation spreads inevitably to the news and even to the editorial pages. A paper cannot be a great advertising medium on some pages and avoid, for something mentally better, a circulation-increasing pruriency and sensationalism on other pages. In the fullness of its time a paper in all its sections tends to become mentally and morally homogenous. Its reporters, superior to stenography and accuracy in general, will not report facts but make "stories." Its editors will write briefs, not critical editorials.

There is, thirdly, the peculiar conservatism of the press. This undoubtedly attaches also to the commercial and financial interests.

Business cannot brook change. Let the issue between progress and standingpat be clearly drawn and the odds, I think, are strong that the press will follow the latter. Changes doubtless must come to a certain degree, within certain bounds, and within these bounds differences may be openly and safely expressed; but the wheels of industry and business and of the established order generally must not be stopped. The newspaper, then, in its lines and between them will be essentially conservative. Progress can come only through the people, through the independent crowd, or through a leader, ideally, of course, through both, and a conservative press may blind the people with organized propaganda, the now accepted name for social and political advertising or salesmanship, and may obstruct or destroy leadership. That latterly we have been living, thanks to the tremendous circulations of our newspapers, in an atmosphere of prurient advertising and pointed propaganda, we all know very well.

But the conservatism of the general press, says somebody, is a most fortunate thing. I agree that a certain conservatism is most fortunate. I would not for a moment prefer and substitute the so-called "radical press." The trouble with the press's conservatism is that so often it is falsely motivated and that, as motivated, it involves the press in a sort of double living. Conservative for its own reasons as to the wheels of industry, conservative in not ever being politically or industrially seriously radical or revolutionary, it quite spoils whatever virtue there may be in this by exploiting the lower and violent sides of human nature, by commercializing in its own news-mongering way murder, sex crime, misfortune. Its "human stories" are seldom any credit or for that matter any fair evidence of human nature. Let it undertake to idealize human nature and it is more extravagant and melodramatic than accurate. Simply, the newspaper's conservatism and its peculiar venal sensationalism go together and in the latter lies such an eventual undoing of the former as might give pause even to the reddest of the reds.

Here, too, I may mention the familiar misrepresenting when not actually lying headline. Writing headlines is surely a fine art, the specific art of making facts in general exciting and of

making specially interesting facts serve some partisan purpose. In the latter respect many a paper has played double, reporting on the whole accurately in the text but duly coloring the headlines. Thus, during the late campaign a certain speaker, known to be for the League of Nations, said that, the League not supported and so failing, the next war would be soon and would be more terrible than the recent Great War. For this news in a certain anti-League paper the heading was in substance as follows: Well-known Pro-League Orator Predicts Another Great War Soon! To anything but most casual reading the paragraphs below quite belied the heading. So, however, at least in the headlines, was an argument for the League turned into one against it, and the partisan readers could be trusted not to read with any care, if at all, below the headlines. Another illustration: Not long ago I sent a communication to a paper of different political views from my own. The letter was an experiment. It called attention to a certain public man's opportunism and inconsistencies, quoting his speeches at different times. I wondered if the paper would publish the letter and face the exposure. It did publish the letter, but with saving headlines, and I have to add, with editorial omissions of essential sentences, so that a shifting and truth-careless politician was made to seem a patriot! I was, of course, helpless. The paper had a right, at least a legal right, so long as newspapers are not common carriers or public servants, not to publish at all, but it had no right either to its headlines or to the editorial changes. The two cases now given only tell a very familiar story. The headline is a great weapon and unbiased important news is the exception, not the rule. In headlines propaganda has its storm troops.

Besides the commercialism of the press, the mongering mentality, and the general conservatism, involving duplicity and, when also aggressively partisan, a certain habit of "fabrication," there is to be considered, fourthly, among my half-truths, the defense, the only specious defense, often given for publicity, especially in instances where privacy has been invaded. The public, the claim is, has a right to know; publicity is society's great safeguard; and, under this claim, the newspaper presumes upon its right to pry. But the claim, I say, although the public often meets the

prier halfway, is specious. It is specious on two counts: (1) The press too often publishes what it does publish inaccurately, shoddily, sensationally, impertinently. (2) It often suppresses what the public has a right to know. It is not, for example, overanxious, having made mistakes of misrepresentation or of injustice, to give the same publicity, if any publicity, to corrections. But, still more seriously, often it will not advocate reforms of real public need, such as those for purer milk or for purer "movies," if—as sometime happens—dairy companies or theaters call for the soft pedal. Such selective sensationalism, I submit, is not an honest and safeguarding publicity.

Related to this defense of publicity, or implied in it, is the notion that a newspaper must give the public what it wants. This also has a specious value, unless the newspaper is to be only the public's creature. But under it what do the papers do? They proceed to catch the public more or less off its guard, either at its partisan blindness, irresponsibility, and selfish interest or at its general state of leisure and relaxation when control is lacking and mind and morals alike are lax. If under these circumstances the public were getting what it really wanted, the newspaper would really be respected for its mentality and its morality, as today it certainly is not or is only exceptionally. The press, of course, is a great power. It is so recognized. The quick and effective publicity that it provides is a very great force and is so appreciated. But, again, there is no genuine, warm respect. The public somehow is not getting what it really wants. Exciting exposure is not appropriate and useful candor. What men will take in conditions of relaxation is not what they most want. Nor am I now speaking only for doctrinaires, idealists, college professors, highbrows generally. Were it not altogether too likely that many a reporter would avidly seize upon the remark as almost, if not quite, one of the chief messages of my present discourse and give it special emphasis, a headline or bold-faced caption, I would go on and say that intellectual and cultural and moral professors have sometimes affected lowbrow, relaxing, and even somewhat vulgar movies or vaudevilles and read first, not last, the corresponding features of the newspapers; but, for safety, I refrain, really remark-

ing only that the general public, however lowbrow and uncultured, would not seek what on casual opportunity, the day's work done, it would read and be diverted by.

A fifth difficulty with the newspaper, discouraging to anyone looking for a newspaper conscience, is its control by the crowd mind. Conscience, somehow, whatever else any definition of it may require, needs a responsible, individual person. Newspapers, however, as a rule are not now edited by individuals in any condition of independence and personal responsibility. In varying ways and degrees the positions of editors are like that of a young friend of mine in the recent campaign, ardently thinking on one side and successfully editing his paper on the other. Add to this factor in the work of newspaper editing today the general conservatism, political or commercial, and the supplemental, aggressive partisanship, and what I mean by the control of the crowd mind must be clear. Editor or reporter in his mental states and movements is made very largely the creature of ideas, judgments, purposes, that are more atmospheric than personally his own, the suggestions of the organization in which he finds himself rather than the results of his own candid experience and independent thinking. Do but reflect, too, on the mass of syndicated matter, and on the large supply of prepared and generously circulated propaganda coming from all well-ordered and organized departments of life that have learned to take care of the publicity end. The wonder is if the modern editor has to do anything but think administratively, that is, of, for, and by others. For my meaning it is not necessary that all editors be in the extreme plight of my young friend already mentioned. It suffices that all the conditions are calculated to develop for newspapers automatic thinking instead of independent thinking. Moreover, now to recall an earlier allusion, if partisanship ever come, as in recent years, to run high, if reactionary forces and an alarmed conservatism become very assertive, the mentality of the press, as of the reading public, will even fall to the level of the ouija board and things like it. I mean that a mental automatism with its release of the morbid and sensational subconscious and its reactions to the atmospheric, its proneness to unreason and strong passions, and above all to suspecting or even,

as the phrase goes, to actually "seeing things," will become general. The press of recent times, I submit, has "communicated" a great deal to a too ready public. "Automatic writing" has not remained the special privilege of a few select spirits.

But, as the last count, there is what is possibly only a corollary of much that has already been said. I mean the newspaper's bias for the normal and aversion to the individual. Already I have had occasion to say that progress can come only through the people and a leader, and that a naturally conservative press, catching the people off guard, by an organized propaganda may blind the people and obstruct real leadership. The press's natural reaction to individuality is hostility. Not even conceding individuality to its own staff, why should it countenance this in others? Why not even resent it in others? Certain it is that the press has shown a special disposition even to persecute individuality, exploiting it sensationally, humorously, derisively, and using it as a foil for exalting the normal and conventional and commonplace. I wonder if here is not one of the worst dangers of the newspaper today. The successful, socialized individual, great for his accumulation, conventionally large and proportionally prominent, gets attention and acclaim; but individuality by quality and originality, by courage and adventure, individuality of the sort that, being vital rather than just formally prominent, is quick with possible leadership, commonly gets neglect or, if attention, then ridiculous exposure. Of course democracy has its eccentrics, its cranks, and fools, as kings and their courts used to, and to give the fools and their follies publicity is entertaining and often may be useful; but also democracy can ill afford to take very large chances of treating its real individuals as fools or worse than fools, even as real malefactors, to be exposed to the laughter and abuse of the common, paying crowd. The paying crowd, I suppose, is democracy's court.

All of which seems to be suggesting that the press is, or is taking large chances of being, falsely democratic, exalting the accumulating individual, the merely big exponent of what all, loyal to the prevailing order, generally are, but disparaging when not actually persecuting the individual of courage and actual leadership who may, of course, literally or figuratively, in the obvious,

narrow sense or more generally, depress the market. The sure end of such false democracy is tyranny. A democracy that does not foster real leadership and the aristocracy of it is only riding to its own undoing. It is rather a strange condition of affairs that the press today should cry so loud, in the interest of democracy, for its own freedom. Is it really willing to be free? Is it quite ready to serve a real instead of a formal and only apparent democracy?

In summary, the case of the people against the press, as I have tried to work it out, now has these chief counts: commercialism, the mentality of salesmanship, a virtual and falsely motivated conservatism, a biased and selective publicity, control by the crowd mind with strong tendencies toward "automatism" and its occult "communications," and a too ready contempt for active individuality and real or possible leadership. That these six counts cross each other more or less does not matter. They may all reduce to one, a conservative commercialism. Certainly I have no reverence for the number six. But, six or one, they do not make clear the existence of a newspaper conscience. On the contrary, as here presented, they must have suggested the non-existence. Still, we have not yet got our definition.

With a prudence, born fortunately of most honest conviction, I have called this discourse a "study in half-truths." Studies in whole truths belong in the field of mathematics or pure science. Vital human affairs cannot be discussed in any but half-truths. Perhaps you have not realized this before; many do fail to realize it; but in any discussion of intimately human affairs one has no choice but to write or talk pro or con and to be only partially right on either side. Nothing human can be wholly bad or wholly good. Money, law, self, sex, adventure are all examples of this. Always in each one are closely met, are set vis-à-vis, the good and the bad. Each, however dangerous or vicious, has actively possible worth. In sex are met the brothel and the home; in adventure and its uncertainties, the gambler and the martyr. The newspaper, intimately a human affair, in its various characters is no exception to the rule. Those six counts against it, as now to be admitted, are only so many half-truths; only so many charges, in

other words, that might be the counts of the defense. Do I say "might be"? I am ready to predict that the counsel for the press will reply to me, if finding reply necessary, by urging ideal possibilities in every fault I have thought to expose. The press, we shall be reminded, ought to be conservative. It ought to be, if not commercial, at least practical, pragmatic. It ought to publish and even boldly expose life and human nature. Is not publicity, like confession, good for real life? The press, again, ought to reflect, even at some risk of a certain automatism, the general mind, not every editor's or reporter's or any chance individual's ideas. In the press, then, as in those other affairs of human life, are met *at least potentially* unideal and ideal, corrupt or corrupting and beneficent expressions of the things of which we have found the newspaper to be made.

Evidently, as an interesting conclusion, the various dangers and faults of modern journalism are not things to be dealt with just surgically. They themselves offer actual resources or opportunities to be realized. They are forces that should not be allowed to have their way but should rather be made mediate and serviceable to the life of society, serving what an active and progressing social life, not what a relaxed or inert life, wants. In certain industries and businesses, for example, a narrow commercial spirit has become enlightened and has given place to a more profitable but also philanthropic pragmatism, and the time must come when the generally narrow, conservative commercialism of the newspaper will realize that in news, in editorials, or in advertising, a sober honesty in the long run makes more money, insures more social and political stability, and mediates fuller life. Partisanship, again, will find that fair play and the sportsmanship of it are the most successful politics, giving up, for being both mean and unwise, what has been called political sabotage. Publicity will become, not morbidly sensational and mongering, not biased and dishonest, but objective, sane, balanced, purposed to society's good, not to society's mere excitement and harm, not to idle entertainment of the curious or itching, nor yet to mere exposure or ridicule or abuse of anybody, above all not to the exploitation of crime and

violence generally for the sake of circulation. Some legislation, possibly, would help to bring such desirable changes; but, while legislation, say by declaring the newspaper a common carrier or a public utility or some combination of these, might hasten such changes, it could not really inaugurate them. Any effective legislation would only be a sign that the press itself was beginning to find itself, to come more ideally than heretofore into its own.

The press has been something of a prodigal. It has run wild mentally and morally. Like so much in our American life, it has grown very rapidly to enormous proportions and amazing power and it is still uncontrolled by any clear appreciation of itself. It has yet fully to realize its true place and work and its faults and dangers are the result. It is still more a creature of the times than an informed purpose. So to speak, its mind and its heart have not kept pace with its body. Nevertheless its condition cannot last. I am of opinion that important changes are not far off. Reform came, it may be remembered, to the sixteenth-century church that was at once so bad and so necessary. Luther, I like to remember, was a contemporary of Machiavelli.

A newspaper conscience? I had almost forgotten my quarry. I submit that if—forgetting I had forestalled them—the newspaper men should rise jealously to defend the press against my charges, reminding me that at most I was telling only half-truths, they would be giving conclusive evidence of an actual newspaper conscience. I should feel that I could trust the press in their hands. In justifying it they would have to idealize it. They would have to discover with some clearness possible worth and service even in the present faults; admitting my charges, however only semitrue, but translating the very offenses into possible and desirable virtues. Moreover, probably every newspaper in the country can show many, oft repeated good works, advocacy of important reforms, generous assistance in “drives,” charities, public benefits of all sorts; and these and other “good works,” although possibly more “in the day’s work” than vigorously, progressively conscientious, do afford a basis for confidence in the press and its future. Conscience I should define as intelligence about self and the life in

which one finds one's self with an accompanying sense of obligation to realize recognized desirable possibilities. With some papers, their number probably growing steadily, already actively and conscientiously awake, with press clubs, such as this now in conference, with the higher education of journalists, making journalism one of the new learned professions, I think we need have little fear for a vigorous newspaper conscience becoming general instead of exceptional. Conscientious journalism can be only enlightened journalism touched with obligation and determination and so turning very serious faults into real virtues.